Why TU Delft must contribute to development in the Global South

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Can the Netherlands effectively and fairly contribute to development in the Global South? What is the role of the University in preparing professionals and critical minds to do so?

In the past, The Netherlands has influenced urban development all over the world. First, it did so through its commercial and colonial ventures. More recently, its impressive capacity to invest in emerging markets has ensured that Dutch technologies, expertise and real estate voracity left their marks in cities of the developing world.

So, has the role of the Netherlands been one of bringing civilization and order to the poor South of the world? Is it its role today? What has changed?

Although the sharp duality between the developed ‘North’ and an increasingly developed but still struggling ‘South’ has somehow dissolved in the past decades, I argue that this duality still matters. Today, technology transfers happen in both directions. However, the rich north of the World (Europe, North America, Japan and paradoxically, Australia and New Zealand) still hold technological supremacy. This supremacy has been challenged by strong contenders: South Korea, Singapore, Brazil, India and Mexico have become global players, with China holding most of the investment capacity towards other developing nations.

Still, we need to ask the question of knowledge and technology transfer between ‘North’ and ‘South’ from a historical perspective, in order to understand the new dynamics of exchange and knowledge production in an increasingly interconnected world.

In past centuries, most architectural and planning practices evolved in the developed ‘North’ and were then passed on to the poor ‘South’. Master plans, motorized transport systems, architectural styles, shopping malls and new towns are among the many practices transferred from North to South. We could say the same of entire political and belief systems: the Enlightenment (the idea of rationality versus superstition, which encompasses human rights and equality) is a good example. As I pointed out, for many years, this transfer was a simple outcome of colonial rule, and then of sheer economic and technological dominance. The relationship between the rich North and the developing South is not a fairy-tale paved with the good intentions of civilization.

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1 Text based on the speech presented for the launching of the book Design & Politics - Are We the World? At the Pakhuis de Zwijger, January 20, 2015, 20:00.
This was one of three planned interventions from authors of the book “Are we the world? Randstad Holland, São Paulo, Istanbul & Rotterdam. Design and Politics #6”, edited by Wouter Vanstiphout and Marta Relats, Rotterdam, 010 (2014)
Rather, it has been mostly an unfair exchange. But things are changing fast and we must move on.

We live in a very different world than the world of the VOC (Dutch East India Company that dominated much of the global trade in the 1600s and most of the 1700s). While many countries in the North are experiencing slow economic and population growth or even decline, industrialization and urbanization in much of the Global South is undergoing dramatic growth. This means that countries in the Global South are urbanizing unbelievably fast and, sadly enough, not in a sustainable and fair way. Most of this urbanization happens "informally". Currently, about 1 billion people in the Global South live in slums, deprived of even the most basic facilities, such as drinking water and sanitation. According to a U.N. Human Settlements Program's report, that number could double by 2030 if governments don't act fast and start giving the issue serious attention.

Still, due to the economic, cultural and academic preponderance of the North, the discourses and understandings about urbanization processes conceived in European and North American Universities and businesses find their way back into debates in the developing world and influence policy making there. This creates 'misplaced ideas', whereby ideas are imported from the North into the Global South with little critique, twisting the meaning of urbanization processes in developing societies.

A good example of this phenomenon is the debate over informal urbanization in the Global South by urban planners and designers in Europe. There is intense romanticisation and aesthetisation of poverty in their discourses. This happens when poverty is disconnected from its political and economic circuits and is merely viewed upon as an aesthetic or spatial phenomenon. According to quite a few contemporary urban designers and planners in the Global North, informal settlements represent a more authentic, 'honest' and politically desirable form of urban development, with intrinsic formal qualities that should be emulated. Governments should be kept out of the equation and bottom-up solutions must be sought at all costs. This is, partly, the result of the prevailing suspicion of strong and intrusive governments that exists in Europe.

What does that mean for the millions of men and women who must endure ghastly living conditions, including lack of sewerage, inadequate shelter, lack of access to drinking water, and who cannot rely on informed, transparent and effective governments to help them? While an interaction between bottom-up and top-down solutions is indeed highly desirable, there is no way urbanization in the Global South will become more sustainable and fair without the participation of governments tackling structural challenges there. People in the Global South do not need less government. They need much more of it!

Informal urbanization is the preponderant mode of urbanization in many parts of the world and governments in the Global South must do much more in steering and coordinating urban development in order to stop the excesses and the deficiencies of the market. These governments need all the help they can get in order to achieve sustainable solutions. And this help can be provided in part by institutions in the Global North, like TU Delft.

The modern European university has a central role in making policy and technology transfers fair, possible and desirable and in preparing the future professionals that will help take decisions and help design solutions for the problems of development in the Global South. Not the least, universities in the Global North attract a large number of students from the Global South, who will then proceed to work in their home countries.
The labour market today is global, and universities must prepare professionals to work internationally.

The underlying question is: are students in the North, both local and foreign, being prepared to tackle the real challenges of urbanization in the South, to which they can contribute so much?

I advocate that TU Delft should do much more to prepare its students for global challenges. TU Delft has a SPECIAL ROLE in fostering shared knowledge. It has the financial and human resources, the expertise, the knowledge and tools to reach out and propose solutions in housing, water management, mobility, and energy efficiency. These are areas of knowledge in which the university specializes and they are crucial for development in the Global South. But we must admit that, without a DEEP UNDERSTANDING of the specific issues, the context, the culture and the political economy of places, any attempt to transfer practices and knowledge will be a futile exercise of vanity and patronization, if not of domination for economic gain.

The way to reach that deep understanding of places is by co-production, by fostering equal partnerships where knowledge circulates both ways and where the knowledge of the Global South about the Global South is valued. This is necessary to make Dutch knowledge relevant, transferable and effective for the citizens of the countries where that knowledge will be applied.